

Light

...on a new world

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a quarterly magazine focusing on the Bible
and its message for today

Damascus

Repentance and Baptism

Paul's third journey

VOLUME 25.2

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Light on a new world

Volume 25.2

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Cover Picture

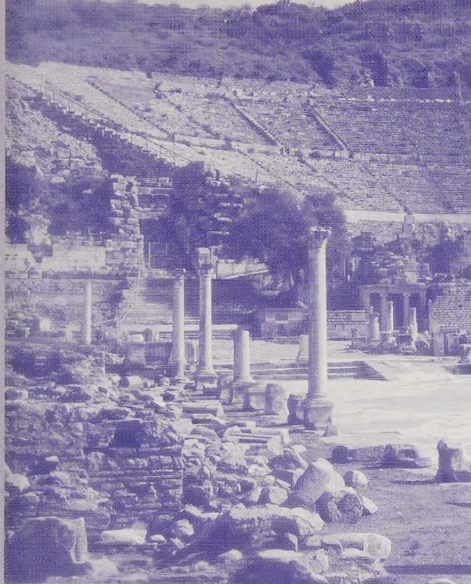
The ceiling of the Sayyida Ruqayya Mosque in Damascus – see article on Damascus.

INSET: The ancient Syrian city of Aleppo devastated by the civil war – see page 30.

Note:

All Bible quotations are taken from the New King James Version (NKJV) except where another version is indicated after the text.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

Part 12: Paul's 3rd missionary journey

Having arrived back in Antioch from his second missionary journey, Paul spent some time recovering before embarking on yet another missionary journey (his third). He began by retracing the path of his first journey in Asia Minor, revisiting and strengthening the churches he had founded which would have included Derbe, Lystra and Iconium, ending up in Ephesus, a major seaport and city, where a church was already founded and where he was now based.

The ministry of Apollos

The newly established church in Ephesus (church = Greek word *ekklesia* meaning 'assembly of those called out' i.e. believers), was at first influenced by a Jew from Alexandria called Apollos who is described as '*an eloquent man and mighty in the Scriptures*' (Acts 18.24). He had been instructed '*in the way of the Lord*' and was '*fervent in spirit*' and '*taught accurately the things of the Lord*' (Acts 18.25). Precise knowledge based on the Old Testament writings where the gospel was first set out was the key to the preaching of the 1st Century Christians.

The faith of Apollos however, was incomplete in that '*he knew only the baptism of John*' (Acts 18.25), that is John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, whose message had been '*Messiah is coming soon*'. Therefore

prepare the way of the Lord.' This was fine teaching but the sequel was even better as Aquila and his wife Priscilla no doubt explained to him: 'Messiah has now come, He has suffered as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. He has risen from the dead and has ascended to heaven as the perfect High Priest. One day he will come again as Messiah and king.'

A potential crisis for this new church was averted by calm instruction from Priscilla and Aquila, a husband and wife team already in Ephesus before Paul arrived. We read that *'they took him (Apollos) aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately'*. No doubt they expanded John's original teaching from Isaiah (chapters 40 and 53) to include the

world-changing events of Jesus' ministry.

Apollos could now realise his full potential as a preacher and teacher. By invitation he crossed the Aegean Sea to Corinth on mainland Greece, a cosmopolitan city where a church had already been established. Here he was a great help in the preaching work, able to refute local Jews who could not accept that Jesus was the Messiah. Apollos then *'vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ'* (Messiah – Acts 18.28).

Letter to Corinth

The city of Corinth was not unlike the materialistic modern societies that can be seen today in cities such as London, full of temptations for



new Christians. Paul tackled these difficulties in his first letter to the Corinthians. This was probably written during his subsequent stay in Ephesus around AD 56.

One such problem was the divisiveness arising from the *'envy, strife, and divisions'* to which the Corinthians were prone. Parties arose among the believers claiming to be followers of the two preachers who had converted most of them, namely Paul and Apollos. *'I am of Paul'* and *'I am of Apollos'* were their slogans. So Paul admonished them in his letter: *'Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed...? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase'* (1 Corinthians 3.3-6).

Apollos would have endorsed this basic teaching about the unity of workers in God's vineyard. Whatever his abilities, Apollos was just another toiler in building on the foundation which is Jesus Christ, as were Paul and many others (1 Corinthians 3.11).

Preaching at Ephesus

By now Paul had arrived in Ephesus to join Priscilla and Aquila in their preaching work. There they had found a small pocket of believers - twelve in number, we are told. The practice at the time was for believers to receive the Holy Spirit following

baptism. These twelve believers, however, had not received this special power; *'We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit'*, Paul was told. *'Into what then were you baptised?'* asked Paul. *'Into John's baptism'*, they replied (Acts 19.2,3). The same difficulty that had showed itself with Apollos showed itself yet again. Those earlier preachers had left an incomplete legacy in Ephesus.

As with Apollos, Paul immediately dealt with this limitation in their faith. He said to them:

'John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus' (Acts 19.4).

These names remind us of the key aspects of the work of Christ Jesus i.e. Christ = Messiah (the anointed king); Jesus = Saviour (God will save).

With their faith completed they were baptized again. Only then did they receive the Holy Spirit after Paul had laid his hands on them and they were able to speak with tongues and prophesy. Thus was shown the primacy of belief and baptism in the process of salvation (see the words of Jesus in Mark 16.16). The Holy Spirit was important while it was present in the first communities of believers, but it was not essential.

For two years Paul continued his preaching in Ephesus. First, as was his practice, he concentrated on the Jewish community, *'boldly' going into their synagogue and 'reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God'* (Acts 19.8). From their own Scriptures he was showing that Jesus was indeed their Messiah (the anointed), their future king.

As so often is the case, the result was active opposition of many in the synagogue speaking *'evil of the Way'* (Way = the Gospel of salvation centred in Jesus Christ – see Acts 19.9) to the city crowds. So after three months of rejection Paul removed himself and his fellow believers and began preaching to the Ephesians generally, *'reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus'* (Acts 19.9), which was probably a kind of learning forum named after its proprietor.

Paul's preaching continued, not only in Ephesus but also in the surrounding areas *'so that all who dwelt in Asia* (a large area which is now part of Turkey) *heard about Jesus Christ, both Jews and Greeks'* (Acts 19.10). It was probably then that the seven churches of Asia Minor (including Ephesus) were founded. These churches or



The Library of Celsus, Ephesus

ecclesias were later to receive the letters from their Master recorded in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

Miracles at Ephesus

Accompanying the preaching and teaching that developed and expanded the Ephesian church, were '*unusual miracles*' performed by God through '*the hands of Paul*' (Acts 19.11). So amazing were these acts of healing that handkerchiefs and items of clothing were brought to Paul for him to touch and so heal the sick to whom they were taken. Those suffering from mental illness, referred to in the record in the language of the time as afflicted with evil spirits, were also healed. In this way the gifts of the Holy Spirit greatly enhanced the preaching of Paul and others in order to establish these first Christian churches.

This evidence of Divine power also drew from the shadows impostors pretending to have the same powers: '*itinerant Jewish exorcists*' tried to heal the evil spirits in the same way. '*We adjure* (solemnly command) *you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches*' (Acts 19.13), they declared. These masquerades rebounded on the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest who was attempting such an exorcism. The poor sufferer turned on them saying '*Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but*

who are you?' and then he proceeded to attack his fraudulent tormentors '*so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded*' (Acts 19.15, 16).

This exposure of falsehood had a salutary effect on Ephesus. Jews and Greeks were now fearful of the power that had been misrepresented by these frauds and '*the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified*' (Acts 19.17). These events also pricked the conscience of many believers living in a city where the practice of magic was rife. Many of them brought out their books of spells, to the value of fifty thousand pieces of silver – a colossal sum – to be burnt in a public bonfire. The effect of this dramatic rejection of superstition was that '*the word of the LORD grew mightily and prevailed*' (Acts 19.20).

These miracles wrought through Paul by the Holy Spirit, and the attempts of charlatans to mimic them, tell us an important truth about the Spirit power possessed by these first Christians. It was a supernatural power directly given to them by the laying on of the Apostles' hands, to be used for a special purpose evidenced by miracles. We must not compare it with the spiritual influence of Christ's teaching with which it is often confused. Eventually the Holy Spirit power was withdrawn.

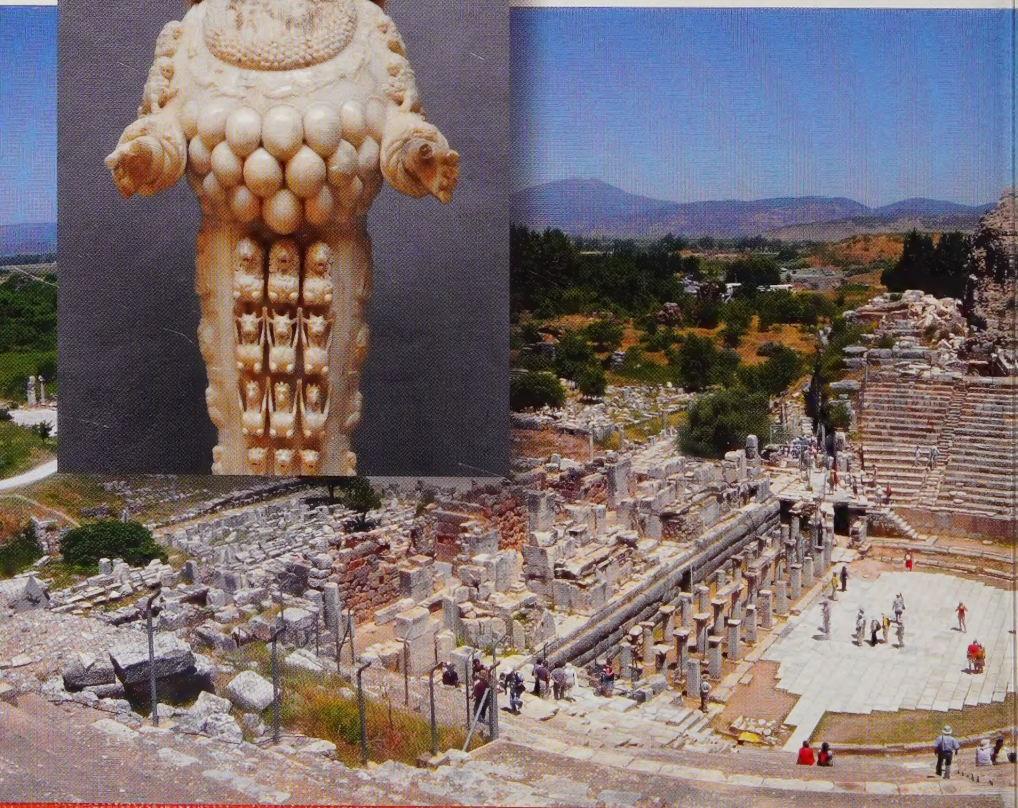
Today there is no evidence that the Holy Spirit is possessed by believers. In the first century it was an important adjunct to preaching the gospel. For now, it remains for believers to look forward to its outpouring in the future Kingdom age.

The pagan goddess Diana (Artemis)



Future plans

Having established an active community at Ephesus, Paul could now plan the rest of what we know as the third missionary journey. He was to travel through Macedonia and Achaia (Greece) ending once more in Jerusalem, as he said: *'After I have been there (Jerusalem), I must also see Rome'* (Acts 19.21). However, changes in circumstances intervened before God allowed him to fulfil this mission. Although Paul had sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus to prepare the ground, an unforeseen and dramatic event



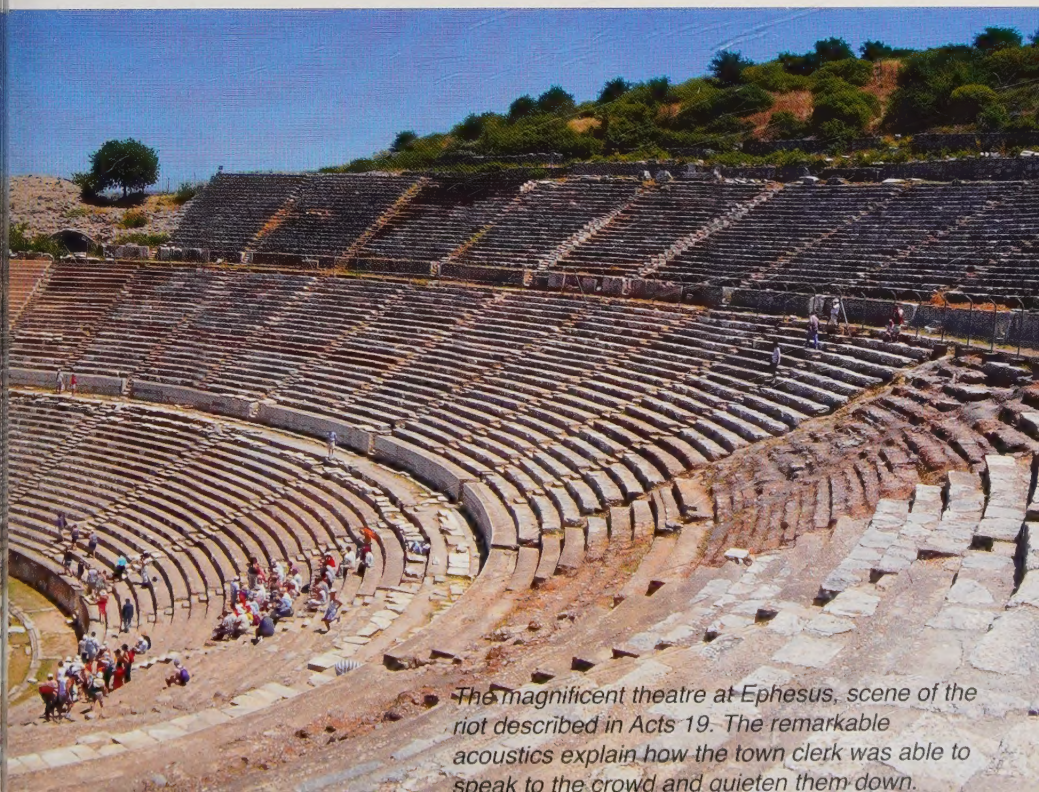
forced him to stay in Ephesus – a riot that could have destroyed him and the new-born church there.

Riot at Ephesus

The origins of the riot lay in the very success of Paul's preaching. Ephesus was the centre of the cult of the goddess Diana (Artemis). Her temple, with its voluptuous statue of the goddess, was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Pilgrims flocked to the city from all over the empire bringing *'no small profit'* (Acts 19.24) to the silversmiths of Ephesus who made silver

souvenirs for the pilgrims to buy. It fell to one Demetrius, a silversmith, to voice these fears to a meeting of his fellow craftsmen:

'Men, you know that we have our prosperity by this trade. Moreover... throughout almost all Asia, this Paul has persuaded...many people, saying that they are not gods which are made with hands. So not only is this trade of ours in danger of falling into disrepute, but also the temple of the great goddess Diana may be despised and her magnificence destroyed...' (Acts 19.25-27).



The magnificent theatre at Ephesus, scene of the riot described in Acts 19. The remarkable acoustics explain how the town clerk was able to speak to the crowd and quieten them down.

Stirred up by this appeal to naked self-interest an excited mob of citizens soon gathered, chanting the slogan '*Great is Diana of the Ephesians!*' Having seized two of Paul's companions they rushed into the town theatre. '*Some...cried one thing and some another... most of them did not know why they had come together*' (see Acts 19.28-32).

Paul wanted to enter the arena to talk to them, but his friends and local officials stopped him from risking his life in this way. Other attempts to reason with the crowd failed and '*all with one voice cried out for about two hours, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!"*' (Acts 19.34).

Eventually the voice of reason in the person of the city clerk was able to quieten and dismiss this dangerous mob. There was, he told them, no immediate threat to the '*undeniable*' reputation of Diana. Innocent men had been detained '*who are neither robbers of temples nor blasphemers of your goddess*' (Acts 19.37). The courts were open to Demetrius or any with a valid grievance. Otherwise there was no reason for the uproar. Eventually common-sense prevailed and the assembly dispersed.

Aftermath

In one sense the city clerk was wrong about the temple and cult of Diana. Within two and a half centuries they were both gone, as paganism succumbed to the political triumph of Christianity under the Emperor Constantine (about AD 330); but the faith that triumphed had become an apostate version of that preached by Paul and his companions. Key doctrines had been corrupted and many of the figures and symbols of paganism were incorporated into the new buildings and symbols of state-sponsored Christianity. Certainly, the widespread worship of Mary and the '*saints*' of Christendom were a version of pagan figures such as Diana of the Ephesians, producing shrines, images and pilgrims in their turn, with a host of money-making opportunities for craftsmen and other interests.

Howard Cooke
Surrey, UK

(to be continued)



from our mail bag

A concern has been raised by a reader as to whether Jesus should be worshipped or whether God alone should be worshipped.

We understand your concern about worshipping Jesus, and like any other question or concern about true worship, we must look into the Scriptures to find a reliable answer. The solution to this question is important as it concerns the relationship between God, Jesus and ourselves.

Jesus is not God himself; he is God's Son and he was quick to correct the man who called him 'good teacher' explaining that it was God alone who is 'good'. On another occasion he said to his disciples: '*...I am going to the Father, for my Father is greater than I*' (John 14.28). It is clear from this and other similar passages that Jesus never put himself in the place

of his Father and neither did he encourage anyone to worship him. Jesus underlined this teaching in a conversation with the woman he met at the well in Samaria:

'...the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship him' (John 4.23).

However, the Bible tells us that by studying the life of Jesus closely we can understand more about his Father. When Jesus said '*He who has seen me has seen the Father*' (John 14.9), he meant that he was a reflection of God's character, for God cannot be seen by us (1 Timothy 6.16). So while the followers of Jesus do not worship Jesus himself, we can be thankful for what Jesus reveals to us about his Father who alone should be worshipped. That revelation sometimes comes from what Jesus tells us about Him (God) but it also comes from the character and actions of Jesus himself.

For example, when we read in the gospel of John about Jesus showing compassion on a woman caught in the act of adultery, we know that neither he nor God approved of adultery (see John 8.3-11). We notice that Jesus did not condemn the woman but offered her forgiveness in the same way that God loves and

forgives all those who repent of their sins.

Because we recognise our own sinful human nature, we have the need to seek forgiveness and it is only by realising this, that we can appreciate our relationship with Almighty God who alone is able to show His grace and mercy towards us.

Worship by its very nature involves prayer and Jesus gave his disciples a model prayer when they asked him: *'Lord, teach us to pray'* (Luke 11.1). This model prayer begins with a direct address to his Father: *'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name'* (Luke 11.2).

After Jesus died and rose from the dead, he ascended to his Father in heaven to mediate on behalf of believers. The only way we can approach God is through the one appointed to be a mediator – Jesus, the Son of God. This is emphasised in Paul's 1st letter to Timothy where the Apostle encourages Timothy to be a man of prayer. He wrote: *'For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'*. Then he adds these important words: *'For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus'* (1 Timothy 2. 3-5).

We note from this passage that the teaching of Jesus and the Apostle Paul make a clear distinction between God and His Son Jesus. God is supreme and Jesus is his Son, who when he was distressed prayed to his Father as he approached the time of his death: *'...Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son also may glorify you.... And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'* (John 17. 1, 3)

We must acknowledge what Jesus achieved in dedicating his sinless life to his Father and showing his love for us, as he said to his disciples: *'Greater love has no one than this, to lay down his life for his friends'* (John 15.13). By doing this he provided a means of salvation from death for those who would believe in him. We are ever thankful to God, who in his love provided His Son to sacrifice his life that believers may have a hope of unending life as Jesus said to Nicodemus:

'...God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life' (John 3.16).

Correspondence Secretary



IMPORTANT BIBLE WORDS

Prayer

Prayer is a fundamental part of the daily life of Christians on their journey to the Kingdom of God. After belief in the gospel message and a commitment to a new life through baptism, we are commanded to pray regularly to our Heavenly Father through Jesus as our mediator (I Timothy 2.5).

A dictionary defines prayer as:

- solemn request or thanksgiving to God
- devout supplication to God
- beseech earnestly for or entreat

To the believer, prayer is far more important. It is the highest activity of which the human spirit is capable and put simply is communication with God. The importance of prayer in the Bible can be highlighted by counting how often the words 'pray', 'prayed' and 'prayer' appear. There are approximately, 230 references in the Old Testament and 160 in the New Testament. The four gospels alone have 66 references including the prayers of Zacharias and Mary, the many prayers of Jesus, and Jesus talking about prayer to his disciples. To learn more about prayer, we will

focus on what he says on the subject.

How not to pray

Jesus instructs his followers to avoid common mistakes when praying:

- Don't pray to impress other people or to show off: *'And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward'* (Matthew 6.5).
- Don't make your prayers long as this does not impress God: *'Beware of the scribes, who...for a pretence make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation'* (Mark 12.38-40).
- Don't repeat yourself or use meaningless words as this stops you thinking about what you are saying: *'...when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words'* (Matthew 6.7).
- Don't pray to remind God what you need: *'Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask him'* (Matthew 6.8).

Prayer is so important for our salvation that Jesus instructs us how to pray in great detail and we just need to read his words from the gospels.

Where to pray

Firstly it is ideal to choose a good place to pray as it should be a personal communication with God. However circumstances do not always dictate that this is possible. For example we read in the Old Testament about Nehemiah who was cupbearer to Artaxerxes king of Persia and he offered a spontaneous prayer prior to answering a question from the king (see Nehemiah 2.4).

The teaching of Jesus is:

'But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly' (Matthew 6.6).

Jesus told his disciples to pray somewhere quiet and free from distractions. In this verse he also says that we are to pray to our 'Father'. Addressing God as our heavenly Father helps us develop the right attitude in prayer. We can better communicate with God when we think of the relationship between a child and his or her father.



Praying for forgiveness

Later in that chapter there is more advice about prayer and forgiveness. Immediately after the familiar words of the 'Lord's prayer' we read:

'For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses' (Matthew 6.14, 15).

Asking for forgiveness for our own weaknesses which are transgressions of God's law, can only be gained when we already demonstrate that we do the same to others.

Prayers will sometimes include asking our heavenly Father for the things we need. Later in this

Jesus says we should resist the pressures to accumulate material things, and pray only for what we need

chapter, Jesus covers that in more detail but with a warning to ask for the right things first:

'Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also' (Matthew 6.19-21).

Introspection

If it is our fundamental desire to gain a place in the kingdom of God on earth, then that should be the main



In his reference to the eye, Jesus says it is easy for us to spot other people's faults whilst ignoring far more serious ones of our own

prayer. Asking for God's help to give us insight into our own behaviour and how we can improve it. Prayer should never include comments about other people, unless it is in the context of asking for strength to encourage and help other believers and our neighbours.

object of our prayers. By praying for this regularly, we remind ourselves of this long term goal in life and refocus our efforts to attain it. Jesus said 'seek first the kingdom of God' (Matthew 6.32). This can help us to make plans and to make progress towards our ultimate goal. This brings us to think about a further benefit of quiet thoughtful prayer. Jesus said:

'...how can you say to your brother, "Let me remove the speck from your eye"; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye' (Matthew 7.4, 5).

How are you going to realise you have a plank in the eye? It takes careful thought and introspection in

Jesus recommends prayer to avoid sins committed by our sinful nature so that we don't yield to temptations. Even Jesus prayed for strength as the time of his crucifixion drew near. During Jesus' last night in the Garden of Gethsemane he said to Peter: 'Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak' (Matthew 26.41). Jesus himself was praying for strength before his trial. We might not be facing such great problems but we still need strength to resist temptations and to follow Christ's commands.

A model prayer

Any article about prayer in the Bible should not avoid mentioning this very special prayer of Jesus. The 'Lord's Prayer' is just 67 words in

length but teaches us so much about prayer and what we need to focus on. Here is a reminder of the words (Matthew 6.9-13):

'In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come.

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever.

Amen'

This is a prayer that we should study carefully. After all, Jesus tells us this is a model prayer to follow with the words '*In this manner*'. The Lord's Prayer can be summarised in six parts, which we can then use in our own prayers. Briefly, these are:

Praise and glory to God verse 9

We need to recognise that God is all-powerful and we must honour him in our lives.

God is in control verse 10

We humbly acknowledge that God will carry out His plan for the world with or without us.

Gratefulness and thanksgiving verse 11

We need to acknowledge that God provides everything we have in our lives.

Forgiveness verse 12

We need to recognise that we are sinners and without forgiveness and God's mercy we cannot be saved.

Strength and help verse 13 (first part)

We need God's help to overcome and wait patiently for Christ's return.

The Kingdom of God verse 13 (second part)

A reminder that the coming kingdom of God must be the focus of our lives and it should encourage us to do the right things.

The prayers of Jesus

There are six other prayers of Jesus recorded in the New Testament and each of them is worthy of further study. Here are some of the key points. After Jesus sent out seventy followers to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God on earth, they returned and reported their successes to him. Jesus then gave a spontaneous prayer of thanks:

'In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in your sight'" (Luke 10.21).

The lesson for us in this account is that we don't need a theology degree to understand the gospel and gain salvation. There is also a slight hint here that Jesus thought it humorous that ordinary folk could see the wisdom in the message but not those who think they are 'wise'.

In the Gospel of John we read about the amazing miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus which Jesus performed by the power of the Holy Spirit:

'Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. And I know that you always hear me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that you sent me."' (John 11.41, 42).

In the Bible, we mainly read about the prayers that Jesus offered in public. In this particular case Jesus

was praying so those listening would know that God was acting through him and the miracle was not to glorify himself but to strengthen their belief in God.

John chapter 17 records a very moving prayer of Jesus, where he prays for himself, for his disciples and for all believers. These inspiring words remind us that:

- God and Jesus are one in thought



RIGHT: Ancient olive trees in Gethsemane where Jesus prayed shortly before his death

- Jesus looked after those given to him by God
- Jesus gave his disciples the knowledge of the Word, his love, God's name, the Truth, joy and the prospect of future glory
- Jesus prayed for those who would receive the gospel message in every age: *'I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in me through their word'* (John 17.20).

After his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus prayed to his Father for deliverance from his coming ordeal:

"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, saying, *"I have both glorified it and will glorify it again"* (John 12.27, 28).

This prayer is remarkable as it lets us know that while Jesus found facing his death a personal struggle, he also had an immediate answer from God which shows that God is listening. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was facing his trial and death. We can learn a lot from these intense prayers:

'Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will,

but as you will". He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done" (Matthew 26.39, 42 NIV).

At this time of intense mental suffering Jesus was thinking beyond the immediate future and about the blessing of his long term future. The lesson is for us to think and pray for our long term good and equally put our trust in God.

Even from the cross Jesus was concerned for others in this astonishing short prayer: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do." And they divided His garments and cast lots'* (Luke 23.34). Then last of all in his dying breath he prayed about himself: *'And when Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, he said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." And having said this, he breathed his last'* (Luke 23.46).

This shows a remarkable level of absolute faith that God would raise him from the dead, a state of mind we should all aim for.

The word 'amen'

There are 54 references in the Bible to the word 'amen' which literally means 'so be it'. An example from the Old Testament is in the book of

Psalms which records many of the prayers of David king of Israel. Psalm 72 is a prayer about the changes that will take place when God's kingdom is established on earth. It concludes with these words:

'Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, who only does wondrous things! And blessed be his glorious name for ever! And let the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen' (Psalm 72.18,19).

We note that New Testament writers often end their letters using the word 'amen'. As it is used in the Lord's Prayer we are clearly instructed to use it in our own prayers in the sense of 'please let it be as we have prayed'.

In conclusion we list some practical advice for your prayers based on the examples recorded in the Bible:

- Find a quiet place and time regularly
- Use the word 'Father' and acknowledge His greatness
- Thank God for His blessings
- Ask for
 - Strength
 - Humility
 - Forgiveness
- Pray for others
- Focus on the coming kingdom of God

- A time for introspection, perspective, acknowledging failings and resetting priorities
- No babbling, repetition or 'stock phrases'
- God knows what we need already but still ask
- Persist in prayer but accept that God decides when and how we will be answered

Nigel Griffiths
London, UK

The view from the top of Mt Ebal (940 metres) east towards the Mediterranean, with Tel Aviv on the skyline

The Bible stands

THE TEST OF TIME

Joshua's altar on Mount Ebal

Our conviction that the earliest historical accounts recorded in the Bible are accurate, can be shown by two examples from the life of Moses' successor Joshua. We are going back to events of ancient history some 1,400 years before Jesus!

The Book of Deuteronomy records a very specific command of Moses, to build an altar of uncut stones on Mount Ebal, which is in the centre of the land of Israel, near Shechem (see Deuteronomy 27.1-10). We also note from this chapter (verse 12 onwards) that Mount Ebal and nearby Mount Gerizim were to be the locations where Joshua would carry out this command:

'Now Joshua built an altar to the LORD God of Israel in Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded..."an altar of whole stones over which no man has wielded any iron tool". And they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings' (Joshua 8.30, 31).

About 30 years ago, Adam Zertal, an archaeologist, wrote about a painstaking survey of every square metre of the tribal area of Manasseh, including Mt Ebal, which took place between 1978 and 1985. In September 1982 work began on the excavation of a mysterious large raised area of stones, surrounded by quantities of broken pottery, that the Arabs called 'El Burnat' meaning 'the hat'. This was not on top of the mountain but on a low stony ridge to the north-eastern side. A huge low central rectangular structure of



The large altar of uncut stone found on the side of Mt. Ebal. The ramped approach can be clearly seen.

rough uncut stones was uncovered, together with a well-preserved shallow ramp at an angle of 22 degrees to the structure. Infilling of the walls was comprised of earth mixed with huge quantities of burnt animal bones and wood ash, layer upon layer. The bones were later analysed and found to be those of clean animals used in sacrifices as prescribed by the Law of Moses. There were also pottery vessels and storage jars of Israelite origin.

After more than a year of digging at the site it was realised that this was indeed an altar. Only then was reference made to Scripture and the implications of the discovery realised! It matched exactly the type of altar Joshua built on that very mountain! Adam Zertal made a

sketch of the structure and this was compared with the altar described in great detail in the Mishnah (a book that expounds the teachings of the Jewish law based on the Law of Moses or Torah) kept in Herod's temple at the time of Christ. Incredibly, its design was virtually the same – after some 1,400 years the pattern of the Mt Ebal altar was preserved in the reconstruction of the temple by Herod the Great. This altar on Mount Ebal fits the Biblical account precisely in terms of scientific evidence relating to the period, nature of the site and location. It was built in the mountain, as the original Hebrew suggests, not on the top of it. This physical evidence for the truth of ancient events recorded in Scripture should not be lost on us. It is another incredible discovery which can serve to bolster faith in the accuracy of God's Word.

The sacred standing stone at Shechem

Another amazing discovery involving Joshua concerns Biblical Shechem which is close to Mt Ebal. It is now a Palestinian Arab town called Nablus, which has been much in the news in recent troubled times. Near the end of Joshua's life he made the people enter a covenant of obedience at Shechem as recorded in the book of Joshua:

'So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day...he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the LORD. And Joshua said to all the people, "Behold, this stone shall be

a witness to us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD which he spoke to us. It shall be a witness to you, lest you deny your God"' (Joshua 24.25-27).

It is very interesting to note that there is some evidence that this stone still exists! There have been at least two detailed digs in the area which may throw light on the Biblical record. The first was in 1926, when Professor Ernst Sellin, an archaeologist, uncovered the courtyard of the temple of the pagan God Baal-Berith at Shechem. The

The pagan temple found at Nablus (Shechem) with its standing stone re-erected.



accounts record how a number of large hollowed out stones were found near the entrance, mistaken at first for watering troughs. He discovered a larger rounded stone which was found by experimentation, to slot into the hollow of its fellow foundation stone. This he took to be the main standing stone of Shechem.

Thirty years later in 1956 the Drew-McCormick expedition re-discovered the socket and what remained of the slab thrown down the bank of the altar into the palace area some 6 metres below. The remains of the broken stone, over 40 cm thick, measured only 1.45 metres of its original height on one side and just 62 cm on the other. Robert Bull records:

‘With great effort, a team of workers tugged and hauled these massively heavy stones back up onto the forecourt of the temple, securing the standing stone in its original base with cement. Once again the ‘massebah’ (Hebrew word meaning ‘sacred standing stone’) dominates the area from a point where it probably stood originally...’ (Biblical Archaeologist Volume 23 for 1960).

Whilst we cannot be absolutely certain, circumstantial evidence points to the fact that this could be the very stone that Joshua erected. Later it was surrounded by similar

stones, in a place that eventually became a temple, not of the God of Israel, but of the pagan god Baal-Berith in the time of the Judges, when the Israelites became idol worshippers (see Judges 8.33, 34).

In this age of scepticism, God provides solid reasons for faith in His Word for those who seek it. The stones in both these examples are indeed witness to the historical accuracy of God’s Word. But more than that, if we look at its teaching and apply it in our lives, we can become associated with God’s plan of salvation. This will give us peace of mind now in this troubled world and a wonderful hope for the future.

Justin Giles
London, UK

The city of Damascus is the capital of modern Syria, and was the most important Aramean city from the 10th-8th centuries BC. The Aramean kingdom was alternately the rival and ally of Israel, until the Assyrians incorporated it into their empire in 732 BC.

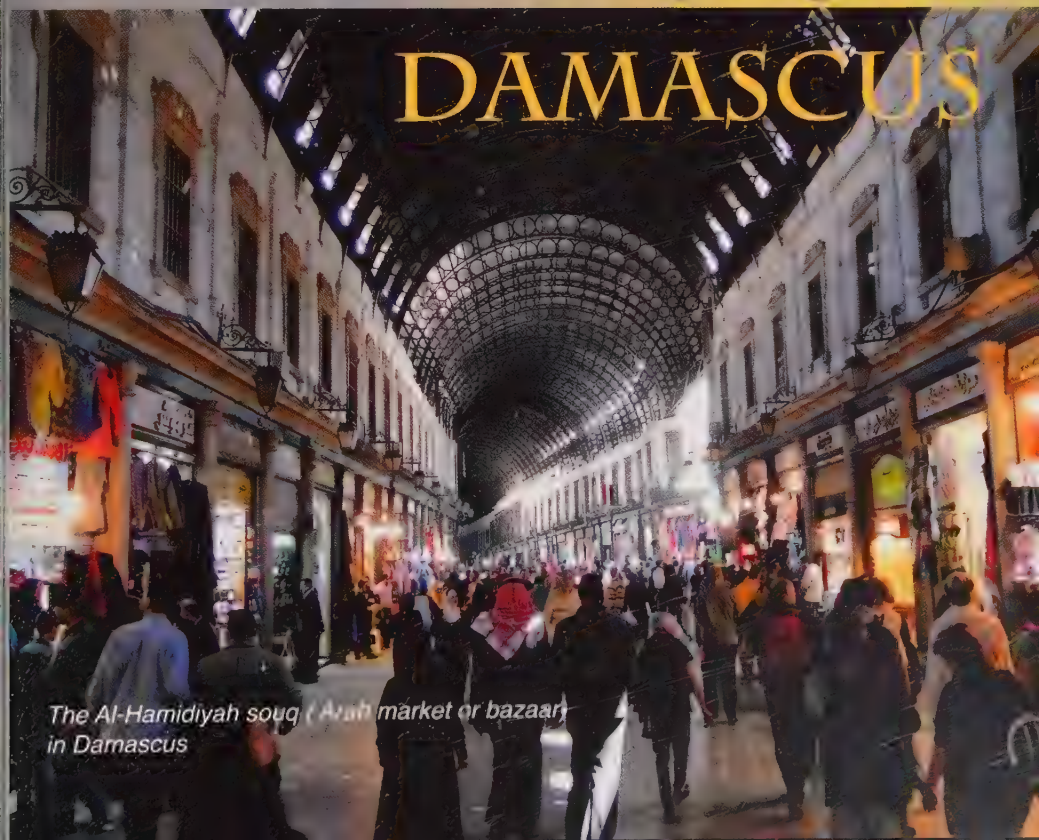
Damascus is situated on the River Abana (today called Barada), protected by mountains to the west and desert to the east. The river valley is fertile and lush. The major trade route from Mesopotamia to Egypt followed this river which flows all year round.

An ancient city

The first mention of Damascus in the Bible is in the book of Genesis which confirms its existence at the time of Abraham (approx. 2,000 BC). Genesis

spotlight on

DAMASCUS



The Al-Hamidiyah souq (Arab market or bazaar) in Damascus



his servants attacked them and pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus' (Genesis 14.14, 15).

In the following chapter, we are reminded that Abraham had a personal connection with Damascus: ‘...Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will you give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”’ (Genesis 15.2).

There is also external evidence to confirm the Biblical record in Genesis. The historian Nicolaus was born in Damascus around 64 BC and in the fourth book of his History he wrote:

Abraham reigned at Damascus, being a foreigner, who came with an army out of the land above Babylon, called the land of the Chaldeans; but, after a long time, he got him up, and removed from that country also, with his people, and went into the land then called the land of Canaan, but now the land of Judea, and this when his posterity were become a multitude; as to which posterity of his, we relate their history in another work. Now the name of Abraham is even still famous in the country of Damascus; and there is shown a village named from him, The Habitation of Abraham'.

The religion of Damascus is mixed. The majority of the inhabitants are Muslims and it is said that there are

chapter 14 describes a war between opposing kings in the Middle East which resulted in Lot, Abraham's nephew, being captured:

'Now when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his three hundred and eighteen trained servants who were born in his own house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. He divided his forces against them by night, and he and

more than 2,000 mosques in Damascus. There are a few Christian districts in the city, with many churches, most notably the ancient Chapel of St. Paul. There is a small Jewish community still living in Damascus in what is called Haret al-Yahud, the Jewish quarter. They are the remnants of an ancient and much larger Jewish presence in Syria, dating back at least to Roman times, if not before to the time of king David. In the reign of his son Solomon, fortified cities were established in Syria to protect both Israel and the ancient trading route from Egypt to Asia and beyond. They were part of the expanded kingdom of Israel, some 950 years before the birth of Christ.

The place of Paul's conversion

The New Testament tells us that the Apostle Paul became closely associated with this ancient city. Before his conversion he was sent to Damascus with a mission to apprehend Christians as we learn from the book of Acts:

'Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked for letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem' (Acts 9.1,2).



The street called 'Straight' (see Acts 9.11) still exists today. Here you see it as it was in 1900

We note from this passage that there was already a Christian community in Damascus called 'the Way'. The dramatic events recorded in Acts chapter nine led to Saul's conversion to Christianity (Acts 9.3-22). Saul himself (later called Paul), as a newly baptized Christian began to preach in Damascus, but news came of a plot against his life and he was forced to escape from the city under cover of darkness, as he later recounted to the Corinthians:



This part of the city wall, though built long after Paul's time, perfectly illustrates how he escaped through a window in the wall.

'In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to apprehend me; but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands' (2 Corinthians 11.32).

Later Paul returned to Damascus before travelling to Jerusalem as we learn from his letter to the Galatians (see Galatians 1.17).

The purpose of Bible prophecy

The Bible contains a great deal of prophecy. Some of it concerns prominent people but most of it refers to cities and nations. There is an important proviso to be made when studying Bible prophecy. These prophecies are not primarily to make us into prophets! It is God who foretells the future! What then is the purpose of prophecy? It is to give encouragement to the servants of God as watchmen, seeking for evidence of the further development of God's plan to establish His kingdom on the earth.

God's declared plan is to fill the earth with His glory (Numbers 14.21). Some prophecies have clearly been fulfilled and this encourages the true servants of God, in that their faith is confirmed. Other prophecies have seen partial fulfilment, whilst some clearly awaits a date in the future. Bearing these points in mind the question may be asked – why is Damascus the subject of prophecy?

Damascus in prophecy

The city of Damascus is very much in the headlines today. Hardly a day goes by without mention in the

RIGHT: the river Barada (biblical Abana) and the Four Seasons Hotel in 2009. Today large areas of Damascus have been damaged.

news media of the slaughter that continues in what is effectively a civil war. Syria is close to Israel geographically, on its northern border (Damascus is about 120 miles to the north of Jerusalem – see map on page 24) and continues to be a threat to Israel. Since the establishment of the State of Israel, there has been effectively a state of war between the two countries. We need to consider Syria and Damascus in the context of Biblical prophecy. There is only one reason why they come within the orbit of prophecy and that is because they have had and still do have involvement with God's people, Israel. The prophet Isaiah recorded these words some 2,700 years ago:

'...Behold, Damascus will cease from being a city, and it will be a ruinous heap' (Isaiah 17.1).

Although the city of Homs has been all but razed to the ground in the current civil war that still rages in Syria, Damascus is still recognisable as a city. There was an earlier, partial fulfilment of this prophecy in the days of Ahaz king of Judah just after the prophet Isaiah recorded these words. Syria had been used by God to punish His people Israel for their rebellion against Him, but, as the Bible shows in a number of instances, such nations are ultimately punished by God. We have an example of this in the words of Isaiah: *'Woe to Assyria, the rod of my anger and the staff in whose hand is my indignation'* (Isaiah 10.5).

What had the Syrians done to bring divine retribution on themselves and the city of Damascus? It was the Prophet Elisha who foretold a change of king in Syria and the way in which the new ruler would oppress God's people: *'...I know the evil that you will do to the children of Israel: Their strongholds you will set on fire, and their young men you will kill with the sword; and you will dash their children, and rip open their women with child'* (2 Kings 8. 12).

The subsequent history of Israel demonstrates the fulfilment of



Elisha's prophecy in what Syria did to Israel and this record in the Second Book of Kings describes the work of Hazeel acting as *'the rod of God's anger'* (2 Kings 10.32, 33). In due course, Syria was to be punished and some 150 or so years after the time of Elisha, this happened in the reign of Ahaz king of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel with its capital in Samaria, entered into civil war with the southern kingdom of Judah with its capital in Jerusalem. Pekah the king in Samaria decided to enlist the help of Rezin, by this time the king in Damascus. Ahaz should have asked help of the God of Israel, but instead of doing so, he asked Tiglath-Pileser the Assyrian king to come and help him and this was the outcome: *'So the king of Assyria heeded him; for the king of Assyria went up against Damascus and took it, carried its people captive... and killed Rezin'* (2 Kings 16. 9).

Damascus was badly damaged, but did not become heaps as required by Isaiah's prophecy. In fact, Syria became part of the Assyrian Empire and so continued to be a city of some importance. This is where the subject becomes very interesting from our standpoint in 2014, in that this did not result in the utter destruction of Damascus. Today, Syria is peopled by races of Arab descent and still exists as a nation. Damascus still stands as one of the

oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world.

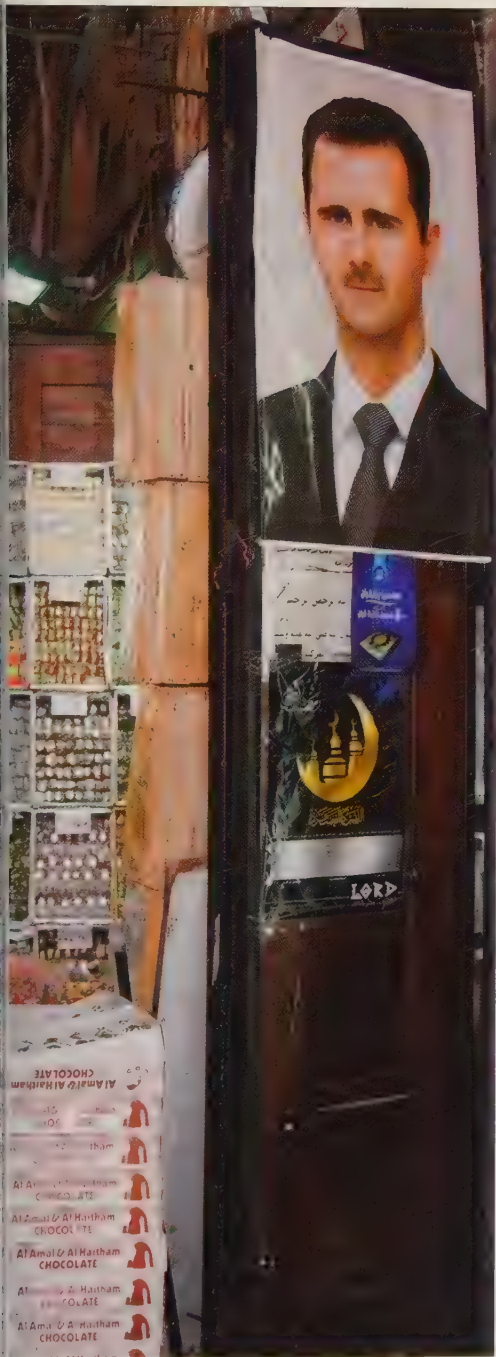
There are other predictions made in the Bible about trouble for Syria and Damascus in particular. Here is an example from Jeremiah who prophesied some 120 years or more after the time of Isaiah:

'Against Damascus... "Damascus has grown feeble and turns to flee, and fear has seized her. Anguish and sorrows have taken her like a woman in labour... Therefore, her young men shall fall in her streets... says the LORD of hosts. I will kindle a fire in the wall of Damascus, and it shall consume the palaces of Ben-Hadad"' (Jeremiah 49.23-27).

Damascus has been attacked, besieged, and conquered down the centuries since the prophets of Israel foretold its destruction, but Damascus has never been completely destroyed and left uninhabited. It is still the seat of government in Syria, but are we witnessing the self-destruction of Syria by civil war?

Is this leading to the final fulfilment of the Old Testament prophets' words? The prophet Isaiah supplies

RIGHT: President Assad's portrait on sale in a souq. An estimated 2.5 million refugees have fled Syria since the outbreak of civil war in March 2011 (source: syrian refugees.eu)



the answer in chapter 24 which reminds us of God's plan to intervene and overthrow the cities of the nations. This chapter begins with a dramatic message: *'Behold, the LORD makes the earth empty and makes it waste, distorts its surface and scatters abroad its inhabitants'* (Isaiah 24.1). The chapter ends with another dramatic change of events. In symbolic language the prophet describes how the sun and moon will be figuratively eclipsed when the glory of God fills the earth:

'Then the moon will be disgraced and the sun ashamed; for the LORD of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem and before his elders, gloriously' (Isaiah 24.23).

God's plan is working out

God's plan is to restore Israel and re-establish the kingdom of God. The nation of Israel is an essential element of God's kingdom and this requires the return of Jesus Christ to the earth, for he is the appointed king to rule the world for God (Acts 17.31). The Bible prophetically speaks of a great power coming from the north at 'the time of the end'. Any power approaching Israel from the north must travel through Syria in order to 'come down' on Israel. The reader is directed to consider carefully the prophecies in Ezekiel chapters 36 to 39 which

*The ancient city of Aleppo in Syria
has been devastated by the
recent fighting*



foretold events that have been partly fulfilled in our own times – the remarkable restoration of the Jews, God's chosen people, to the land of Israel.

At the present time the Jews are surrounded by enemies who wish to annihilate the State of Israel. Syria and Iran to the north, Egypt to the south and other Arab countries to the east have, since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, threatened to destroy God's people. The 'end-time' prophecies make it clear that a concerted effort will be made by 'the king of the north' to take control of the Middle East. The same 'end-time' prophecies make it clear that this attack will not succeed in its aim, because God is going to intervene and send back the Lord Jesus Christ to save Israel and establish the kingdom of God (see Daniel 2.44).

We are seeing today the build-up to this time foretold by the prophets of Israel. Many towns in Syria have literally become ruinous heaps but for the moment Damascus is relatively unscathed. The ancient city of Damascus, familiar to Abraham, fortified as an outpost of Solomon's kingdom and known to the prophets of Israel will one day become 'a ruinous heap'.

Jesus urged his disciples to watch events and prepare for the day when he will return to bring lasting peace to this troubled world.

Stephen Bonner
Kent, UK

*Please apply for your free copy of
'Light on Prophecy' (see back cover)*



BIBLE TEACHING ABOUT:

Repentance and baptism

'Sin' is an old fashioned word. Many people treat the matter of sin rather lightly, often with a sense of amusement when others talk about it, because it does depend upon the standards which we adopt. What may be considered wrong, or a sin to one person, may not be so to another.

By what standard then should sin be measured? There can be only one measure – God who created us in the first place has set the standard. His Word the Bible alone distinguishes between right and wrong. Set against Bible standards,

the world at large falls far short of the standard that God requires, in order that a man or woman may be accepted by Him.

If we are to find a way out of our present state as sinners, we need to understand why we are in this predicament. The Bible tells us that sin is disobedience of God's law. It also tells us that all have sinned - except one man Jesus who was the sinless Son of God. The Bible also leaves us in no doubt about the origin of sin. The root cause of sin is found in the first book of the Bible. Many Christians regard the book of Genesis as myth or allegory – but it gives us the only logical explanation of the origin of sin and why we die. Jesus himself endorsed the book of Genesis and if we are to be counted among his followers we must first of all understand and believe these

fundamental truths concerning our existence.

Our first parents had both been given ample evidence of God's love and care for them and apart from this one prohibition, everything was theirs to enjoy. The test of their characters came in this simple command: *'you shall not eat'* of this one tree (Genesis 2. 16, 17). But they did eat of its fruit! As a result sin entered the world, as Paul explains in the New Testament: *'...just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned'* (Romans 5.12). This makes the matter of sin an extremely important subject.

We cannot argue that Adam and Eve did not understand what God required. They both understood the command and fell short of the standard set by God. By their transgression they brought sin into the world, followed by death as the consequence of their sin. Naturally speaking we are all in the same state as our first parents – we are sinners – and with the same prospect as they had. Those words of the Apostle Paul above confirm the reality of the state of sin which has affected the whole human race since that time.

An appeal to repentance

Is there any escape from this seemingly hopeless situation? The answer is 'yes' and it's through the forgiveness of our sins. How can we obtain forgiveness? – through repentance. The Apostle Peter addressed a large crowd assembled in Jerusalem who, when they had heard his address concerning the mission of Jesus Christ, we are told that *'they were cut to the heart'* and they asked: *'what shall we do?'* (Acts 2.37). The answer of Peter was:

'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...' (Acts 2.38).

Repentance implies believing what God has told us in His Word the Bible and acting on that belief by changing our way of life – it's the first step on that path to escape the finality of death – and the next step is baptism. There is no question about the need for baptism - it is reinforced by the teaching and example of Jesus and his immediate disciples. Baptism is first mentioned in Matthew's gospel record where we read concerning the mission of John the Baptist: *'In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand..."'* (Matthew 3. 1, 5, 6).

The need for baptism

Jesus himself was baptized by John and this simple act that Jesus undertook *'to fulfil all righteousness'* (Matthew 3.15), gives us an indication of the importance Jesus himself placed on it. This is later confirmed by Jesus' instructions to his disciples just before his ascension into heaven:

'...he said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel (good news) to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned"' (Mark 16.15, 16).

Therefore, if Jesus placed such importance on belief followed by baptism, we should look carefully at what it means to be baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must decide if it is important to us as well in the 21st Century. Those who were baptized by the apostles, did so only after coming to a state of understanding and belief of the gospel – this process is what the Bible calls repentance – it is a complete change of direction – a new way of life – a change from pleasing ourselves to trying to please God in our lives and obey God's commandments.

Example of the Ethiopian eunuch

In the book of Acts we read about an Ethiopian eunuch, whose example is a demonstration of repentance followed by baptism. He had been reading a passage from the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah but did not understand its meaning. The result was that *'...Philip opened his mouth, and beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him. Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" Then Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God"'* (Acts 8.35-37). It was only then that he and Philip went down into the water – that is after Philip had heard his declaration of faith and belief.

The importance of baptism

Now perhaps you can appreciate the importance of baptism; by being baptized in the name of Jesus Christ we can obtain forgiveness of sins. We identify ourselves with the saving work of Jesus and become related to him. Paul shows us the importance of this relationship through baptism in his letter to the believers at Rome:

'...don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life' (Romans 6.3,4 NIV).

Jesus lived a sinless life – the only member of the human race to have achieved the perfection of character that is so pleasing to God (see 1 Peter 2.21,22). His victory over sin and death and the hope of eternal life he offers to all, can only become a reality through association with him in baptism. In the same way that Jesus died and rose again from the dead, by undergoing a baptism of total immersion, in effect we 'die' and 'rise again' to a new life. Baptism is a symbolic burial and resurrection to a new way of life. Paul continues in the letter to the Romans:

'If we have been united with him (Jesus) like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him' (Romans 6.5-8 NIV).

Baptism is also a symbolic washing. In recounting his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus and his subsequent meeting with Ananias, Paul records how he was told: '*And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away...*' (Acts 22.16 NIV). The washing away of sins is therefore identified with baptism. Paul wrote to the believers at Corinth: '*But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ...*' (1 Corinthians 6.11 NIV).

Perhaps you can see from these verses that anything other than total immersion in water is not baptism in the way required by God and is ineffective as a means of salvation from death.

What does baptism achieve?

We have already seen that belief is essential before baptism, but there must also be a change of heart. Before being baptized, the believer must recognize that his or her life up to that point had been in service to the natural self with its human desires and selfishness. Repentance or a change of heart is a new determination not to serve sin but to serve God as Paul wrote to the Romans:

'Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey

its evil desires....but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness' (Romans 6.12,13 NIV).

The result of this change of heart is made clear by Paul's words to the Romans:

'But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to

A believer is baptised by immersion in a river in Africa



God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Romans 6.22,23 NIV).

Is baptism essential?

It may be argued that there are many people in the world who are living upright, generous, selfless and God-fearing lives and that repentance and baptism are not necessary for them. However, the Bible is very clear in its teaching that the only way to salvation is through baptism. In the book of Acts there is a good example of a man who had these characteristics: *'He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly'* (Acts 10.2 NIV). One day an angel appeared to Cornelius while he prayed and instructed him to send for the Apostle Peter, as his prayers and gifts to the poor had been remembered by God. Peter, on arriving at the house of Cornelius, proceeded to preach the gospel to all the household, concluding with these important words:

'All the prophets testify about him (Jesus) that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name...Can anyone keep these people from being

baptized with water?' (Acts 10.43,47 NIV).

Cornelius and all his family were baptized there and then, the first Gentiles (non- Jews) to do so. So even though God had heard the prayers of Cornelius and noticed his treatment of the poor, God required him to be baptized to receive the opportunity of salvation that God offers to all.

The lesson of Naaman the Syrian

In the Old Testament there is a telling story about a Syrian army commander. As this man Naaman found out, God doesn't demand any great act of us, simply obedience. The Second book of Kings records how Naaman suffered from leprosy and, at the suggestion of an Israelite slave girl, he approached the prophet Elisha to be cured. The prophet sent a messenger to tell Naaman to wash in the River Jordan seven times to be cured.

Naaman was furious, for firstly the prophet had not recognized his importance and had not come to meet him in person. Secondly, to wash in the River Jordan was beneath him. Fortunately his servants persuaded him to think again by suggesting that if he had been asked to perform some great act, he would have obeyed willingly,

so why not when it was such a simple task. Naaman took their advice and washed in the river as instructed and was immediately healed (see 2 Kings 5.14,15). And that is the lesson of baptism – it needs humility to obey this simple command but there is no other way if we wish to associate ourselves with the saving work of Jesus and to have the opportunity to receive the gift of eternal life.

We all have to make choices as we go through life. If we wish to escape the clutches of SIN we also have a choice. Believe what God has told us through His Word the Bible – be obedient to the Divine command – repent and change our way of life – be baptised and live our lives in service to God. The answer to the question is abundantly clear then – it does matter what we believe about baptism – in fact we could say it's a matter of life or death! There are two choices as the Apostle Paul makes clear:

'...the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Romans 6.23).

Which choice will you make?

Colin Dryland
London UK

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